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Imagery and Universe in Dylan Thomas's '18 Poems'*

The poems of Dylan Thomas's first book of verse give the impression of orderly structures highly finished in style, but their meaning seems to lurk somewhere below the surface, and even the sensitive reader is likely to grasp their import only in rough outline, like a shape felt through a blanket. Actually, these poems are no less meaningful and exact in expression than Thomas's later work; their obscurity is due to peculiarities imposed upon them by their subject, a vision of the universe reduced to a few absolute spiritual and biological facts. In these poems Thomas seeks ultimate reality within himself, examining the miracle of existence in the light of

* The poems are reprinted, in the same order, as the first eighteen in Thomas's *Collected Poems* (New Directions).

his own existence, seeing in his own birth a symbol of creation, and in such activities as sleeping and loving, analogues of the universal processes. *18 Poems* elaborates the self-discovery of adolescence into a grand cosmic drama.

The universe through which Thomas's imagination moves has so much in common with the cosmos of Blake's prophetic works that it may be appropriately described as a "fearful symmetry" in which the forces of life and the forces of death form opposed and complementary halves of a single process. Creative power is embodied in the growth, fertility and faith apparent everywhere in nature, but these are shadowed by their necessary opposites of decay, sterility and unbelief. "Without Contraries," said Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* "is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." In *18 Poems* the conflict between two such sets of forces produces the cycle of the seasons, the development of organisms, and the familiar processes of nature. Since neither life nor death is ever finally triumphant, but must sooner or later submit to change, every object and event is at once beneficent and sinister, bearing within itself the potentiality of its negation. The ultimate, in this transparent universe, is part of the present; there is "doom in the bulb," and ". . . the womb/Drives in a death as life leaks out."

Although the images of these poems seem eccentric and enigmatic, their frequent repetition suggests that they are used in accordance with some method. As Elder Olson has pointed out, their references are, in fact, remarkably consistent:

> . . . he tends to use wax as a symbol of dead or mortal flesh, oil as a symbol of life, the sea as a symbol of the source of life, salt as a symbol of genesis in the sea. Scissors or knives are symbols of birth (on the ground that the birth-caul is cut open, the birth-string cut) or of death (on the ground that the thread of life is cut, the branch lopped) and of sexual connection (on the ground of its relation to life and death). He analogizes the anatomy of man to the structure of the universe, too, and sees the human microcosm as an image of the macrocosm, and conversely . . . Wounds, one of his most persistent symbols, stand for a number of things: the pain of life, the heart, the navel wound, the sexual parts and the sexual act, Christ, the effects of Time.[1]

[1] Elder Olson, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas,* University of Chicago Press, 1954.

Thus, it is clear that Thomas's images are not formed by free association or the "psychic automatism" of the surrealists. On the contrary, they refer in an intricate and systematic manner to his view of the universe. They are the expression of a disciplined imagination working with complicated material "to twist the shapes of thought/Into the stony idiom of the brain," that is, into the language of symbols.

The most striking of the images in *18 Poems* are three key metaphors defining the relationship between God and the universe. The first compares both man and the universe to machines operated by God. The image hardly seems to suit a view of the world which lays so much stress on growth and other organic qualities, but a certain logic is perceptible in Thomas's use of it. It suggests that creation, including man, is an assortment of parts which derives its energy from without. Deprived of the power given to it by God it would be dead and inert, like an instrument which has been laid aside, or an electrical appliance whose current has been cut off. The metaphor appears in many forms, making use of a variety of mechanical contrivances. Simple mechanical operations like swiveling, levering and rotating contribute a significant part of the vocabulary. In No. 6 the body is compared to an electrical device, the brain being the source of power. The poem speaks of "these poor nerves so wired to the skull," and describes the "hero" maintaining his contact with it by holding "the wire from this box of nerves." In several cases the submerged metaphor involves a pneumatic drill. No. 16, for example, describes the dream of birth in terms which have the child

> . . . breaking
> Through the rotating shell, strong
> As motor muscle on the drill, driving
> Through vision and the girdered nerve.

Two of these images compare man to a motor or automobile whose sleeping and waking states are different gears. No. 9, asking which of "our two sleepings" will ultimately prevail, expresses one of the alternatives as ". . . drive the night-geared forth." In No. 16 the dream of death is called a ". . . journey/In bottom gear through night-geared man."

The fact that machines are generally made of metal is in itself a rich source of metaphor in *18 Poems*. It explains such language as "the brassy blood," "the heart in the ribbing metal," and "mechanical flesh," all drawn from No. 18. The unborn Jesus speaks of "my

flesh's armour" in No. 4, describes his primal condition as "my molten form," and refers to "the leaden stars." In No. 16 the speaker, narrating the nightmare of his death and rebirth, says that he

> . . . filed
> Through all the irons in the grass, metal
> Of suns in the man-melting night.

The machine metaphor helps to explain the perplexing occurrences of the word "worm." For many of the contexts in which it appears, the usual associations of the word are sufficient; the worm is the instrument of death and decay, the ultimate conqueror of all life. There are, however, a number of instances where the usual sense and connotations are unsatisfactory. Some of these involve mechanical contrivances, and "worm" has a special meaning in connection with machinery; it is a short revolving screw which gears with another mechanism to make it turn or move. This identification is more or less clearly made in No. 2, where God, the speaker, in describing the events leading to the fall of man, fixes the period as the time "When once the twilight locks no longer/Locked in the long worm of my finger. . . ." and "When once the twilight screws were turned. . . ." Here the worm or screw transmits energy from its source to the machine, a metaphoric expression for the transmission of life from God to the universe by means of the creation.

A second metaphor dealing with the relation of God and the universe compares life to a disease, a "fever" contracted from a divine source. Although it is painfully reminiscent of "After life's fitful fever he sleeps well," Thomas puts this metaphor to use in a number of original ways. "Fever" sometimes means the life-giving power of love as in "love's first fever" and "the cross of fever." The forces of the universe, both creative and destructive, move by "contagion." The deathly influences of No. 11 are carried in this way; "the unwholesome wind/With whistler's cough contages. . . ." In No. 18 the lover, because he is the source of new life, is called "contagious man."

The third and most impressive God-universe metaphor conceives of life as an explosion originating at the moment of creation, and spreading continually through the universe in the form of fertility and growth. In No. 2, for example, God, the speaker, says that although he has sent his creature down to earth, both his emissary and the earth itself remain connected to his "flask." The word introduces the next image, for one of the meanings of "flask" is a con-

tainer for powder. Thus God, as a grenadier or artilleryman, describes the Golden Age created by the release of his beneficent powers as an explosion:

> My fuses timed to charge his heart,
> He blew like powder to the light. . . .

In No. 5 the image has both creative and destructive connotations:

> The force that through the green *fuse* drives the flower
> Drives my green age; that *blasts* the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer. . . .

Because man is subjected to the conflict of forces which rages in nature, Thomas identifies the human body metaphorically with the world. He attributes sensuous capacities to the earth, and conversely, speaks of the body as a cosmos, seeing a momentous symbolism in its organs and activities. This metaphor is developed most explicitly in No. 14, whose diction merges his body and earth by referring to both levels of meaning at the same time:

> Dawn breaks behind the eyes;
> From poles of skull and toe the windy blood
> Slides like a sea. . . .

Man occupies a crucial place in Thomas's dialectic universe because his spiritual capacities give religious significance to the otherwise meaningless alternations of life and death. For Thomas, as for Blake, "everything that lives is holy," and the energies that produce life through desire and procreation are a current streaming from God. Thus, the physical processes which supply so much of Thomas's imagery are metaphoric equivalents for spiritual ones. When Jesus speaks in No. 4, he describes the spiritual regeneration he is about to bring into the world by using metaphors drawn from childbirth. Sin is associated with sterility and the destructive natural processes. Lack of faith is coupled with dreams or sleep, which symbolize the illusions or indifference of the unbeliever. Thus, in No. 9 dreams are logically called "Our eunuch dreams, all seedless in the light," and the same poem's reflections on the hypnotic illusions of motion pictures lead to the conclusion that "The dream has sucked the sleeper of his faith. . . ."

In addition to these dominant metaphors, other suggested associa-

tions pervade *18 Poems*. For example, No. 15, a poem describing a dream about a visit to heaven, narrates the poet's ascent to the upper world in the line, "I fled that ground as lightly as a feather." This is a clear and even a trite figure, but an examination of Thomas's use of the word "feather" reveals that it is half of a suppressed metaphor whose symbolic value is both original and appropriate to its contexts. The passages containing "feather" include the following:

> And I was struck down by death's feather.
> —No. 4

> And what's the rub? Death's feather on the nerve?
> —No. 8

> What colour is glory? death's feather? . . .
> Who blows death's feather? What glory is colour?
> —No. 17

In view of the association of the feather with death, No. 15's description of the rise to heaven carries with it a strong suggestion of the usual way of getting there. Why does Thomas associate two such different things? The answer, I believe, is supplied by another use of the feather-symbol:

> Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam,
> The cancer's fusion, or the summer feather
> Lit on the cuddled tree, the cross of fever. . . .
> —No. 11

Here the cancer and the "summer feather" symbolize the suffering which, through the cross, produced spiritual regeneration as "joy" could not. The feather "lit" on the cross, suggesting a picture of death floating gently down to settle on its victim.

The image occurs in one more context, a question and answer which have just been quoted in part:

> Who blows death's feather? What glory is colour?
> I blow the stammel feather in the vein.
> —No. 17

The speaker here, who has described himself vividly in terms of war, death and sin, is the "unborn devil" mentioned in an earlier stanza. "Blow," as we have seen, relates to the explosive power of cosmic forces. Thus, the Satanic speaker's reply to the question he has

repeated after his interlocutor means simply, "I bring red death to the blood," or, "I am the cause of death."

Another peculiar, but more beautiful and more intelligible association is expressed in its most complete form in the lines:

> My busy heart who shudders as she talks
> Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words.
> —No. 10

"Syllabic blood" involves a comparison between blood and language. Language is made up of units, words, just as the blood is made up of its little coin-like cells. In Thomas's view it performs for the spirit the life-giving function which the blood performs for the body. In No. 13 language appears as one of the elemental forces of creation, and the medium through which God makes known his existence: "In the beginning was the pale signature,/Three-syllabled. . . ." The logic of the blood-language relationship seems to be based on the idea that language, like the sufferings of Christ, is a means of declaring God and the true nature of the universe. In No. 13 the blood of the crucifixion, transformed into "a sign," assumes semantic properties:

> The blood that touched the crosstree and the grail
> Touched the first cloud and left a sign.

The association reappears two stanzas later:

> In the beginning was the word . . .
> The word flowed up, translating to the heart
> First characters of birth and death.

Here the word, behaving like blood, is a means of animating spiritual awareness. The blood-language association explains the odd adjective of "my wordy wounds" in No. 8, and creates beautiful ambiguities and overtones in No. 10, which is about the craft of poetry:

> Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark
> On the horizon walking like the trees
> The wordy shapes of women. . . .

The "tower of words," it seems, means the poet's body as well as his state of preoccupation with language, and the epithet "wordy"

lends some physical substance to the picture of the garrulous women he sees in the distance. Finally, the association illumines the idea of "spelling" in the same poem:

> The heart is drained that, spelling in the scurry
> Of chemic blood, warned of the coming fury.

Thomas's images are peculiarly fitted to express the realities of his dialectic universe, for they embrace antithetical meanings. Machines are alive in a sense, yet they have no life of their own. The fever of life ultimately ends in death. Explosions, symbolic of the animating force of the universe, also destroy. The ambiguity of these metaphors reveals an important fact about the vision of *18 Poems*. In Thomas's universe the creative and destructive processes which are ordinarily considered successive to each other are simultaneously at work. Birth and death, growth and decay, holiness and sin, the polar opposites of existence, lie together in every object, folded together like the petals of an unopened flower. Hence such paradoxical epithets as "the fathering worm" and "the galactic sea." In No. 3 ". . . the quick and the dead/Move like two ghosts before the eye," for the living too are "ghosts" in potentiality, and potentiality in this realm is actuality. The unborn and unbegotten Jesus of No. 4 declares that He has already suffered the torments of the cross. It is clear that Thomas is writing of a world where past, present and future are all known, all present at once, all parts of a single enduring reality.

Although critics have found both primitive and medieval elements in Thomas's poems, the universe of *18 Poems* is more like the cosmos suggested by the theory of relativity than any other. As Mr. Lawrence Durrell has shown in *A Key to Modern British Poetry* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), modern literature has paralleled scientific theory in some ways, so that even authors who know little directly of relativity or psychoanalysis seem to feel that they are living in the kind of universe these theories describe.

The theory of relativity, by regarding time as a continuation of space, implies that it does not *pass* as it seems to, but, like space, remains always present. Sir James Jeans, examining the relationship between this conception and evolution, says:

> . . . many have thought that . . . the whole comparison between the evolution of the world and the weaving of a pattern is faulty.

> Time, they say, no longer remains time or involves change; it is merely a geometrical direction of our own choice in the continuum. The pattern is not being continually woven piece after piece in a time which no longer exists, but is spread before us complete in a continuum in which future events have just the same kind of existence as past events.

Our ability to touch time at only one point which we call the present gives the illusion that what has gone before has ceased to exist, and what will come after does not yet exist. These are convenient fictions that apply to life on earth, but they do not fit that absolute view of reality which the theory of relativity (and religious mystics like Thomas) seeks to achieve. Actually, say the theorists, all existence is simultaneous, just as space is, and the notion that time passes is a consequence of man's limited perception. The idea that past and future exist *somewhere* is familiar enough in literature. How else could Marlowe's Faustus have called up Helen, or Scrooge have seen the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Christmas Yet to Come? Obviously, these visions were imagined as waiting in wings of time as real as the stage of the present itself.

When creation is regarded as an absolute, time disappears. For, as Giordano Bruno says in a passage cited by Mr. Durrell in *A Key to Modern British Poetry,*

> God does all things without deliberation, anxiety or perplexity—provides for innumerable species and for an infinite number of individuals, not in any order of succession but at once and all together. He is not like a finite agent, doing things one by one, with many acts—but he does everything, past, present and future, with one simple and unique act.

Thus, all of creation is a continuous unity, like a leap, whose nature is completely misrepresented when it is measured into separable periods of time. From this point of view time is, so to speak, foreshortened out of existence. No object can have a single identity, but must be regarded as a composite of all its stages of development, a cluster of forms and conditions inexpressible in ordinary language.

It seems as if Thomas moved from duality to multiplicity in his attempt to convey the nature of absolute reality. As he says in No. 12,

> From the divorcing sky I learnt the double,
> The two-framed globe that spun into a score. . . .

In *18 Poems* he superimposes, one upon another, conditions that are far apart, not merely in time, but also in dimensions that we do not generally recognize as forms of time, such as space, logic and appearance. The effect approximates what would result if many frames of a movie film were projected on a screen at the same time. Out of the confusion isolated details would emerge, and if the observer were aware that he was examining a series of consecutive pictures, he would be able to reconstruct the action, and to see the multiple picture as a unified impression of something ordinarily represented only in part by a single frame.

The last of the *18 Poems* is an excellent example of Thomas's use of imagery to express the diverse and contradictory facts of his timeless universe. It is one of the richest and most obscure poems in the volume, but it is free of the harsh and mechanical effects which are sometimes produced by Thomas's persistence in clinging to his metaphors. Although its general import is not, perhaps, entirely inaccessible to a reader unfamiliar with Thomas's methods, it cannot be thoroughly understood without such a study of his symbols as has been attempted here.

> All all and all the dry worlds lever,
> Stage of the ice, the solid ocean,
> All from the oil, the pound of lava.
> City of spring, the governed flower,
> Turns in the earth that turns the ashen
> Towns around on a wheel of fire.

The "dry worlds" are human bodies, a frequent metaphor, as we have seen, and they are the subject of a rather elusive sentence whose verb is "lever" and whose object is "All all and all." The second line mentions some of the barren spheres which come under the influence of the creative forces symbolized by the "bodies" and by the "oil" and "lava" in the third line. The flower, awakening in the soil with a movement which is compared to the whirling of ruined cities on the circumference of a devastated earth, is another symbol of life arising in the midst of death. "Town" and "flower" are merged into a single image uniting the contrary elements of growth and destruction. The epithet "city of spring" suggests that the flower is "governed" by the forces of nature, and, like the town, is an orderly organization of parts.

How now my flesh, my naked fellow,
Dug of the sea, the glanded morrow,
Worm in the scalp, the staked and fallow.
All all and all, the corpse's lover,
Skinny as sin, the foaming marrow,
All of the flesh, the dry worlds lever.

The second stanza describes the dual nature of the body in appropriately ambiguous language. "Dug" can, of course, mean either "drawn from the sea," or (especially in connection with "glanded morrow") the breast of the sea. The worm in the scalp is, in part of its range of meaning, the brain, the small mechanism which activates the rest of the machine. Such language as "staked and fallow" continues the body-earth metaphor and the idea of "dry worlds." In the last lines the body's act of love is presented in its sinful aspect, "marrow" having its old meaning of "mate" or "spouse."[2]

Fear not the working world, my mortal,
Fear not the flat, synthetic blood,
Nor the heart in the ribbing metal.
Fear not the tread, the seeded milling,
The trigger and scythe, the bridal blade,
Nor the flint in the lover's mauling.

This first stanza of Part II cautions the body not to fear the forces of creation which it feels within itself, for it is a "working world," an active machine, whose parts are "synthetic" and "metal." The last three lines here contain a number of superimposed images, all machines. Because it contains "seed," the body is compared to a mill which grinds "seed," and because of its capacity for releasing the explosion of fertility, it is compared, through "flint," to a gun. The antithetical quality of these machine images is interesting; each of them is concerned with sex and fertility, yet at the same time it has at least a suggestion of violence.

Man of my flesh, the jawbone riven,
Know now the flesh's lock and vice,
And the cage for the scythe-eyed raven.
Know, O my bone, the jointed lever,

[2] This reading is not intended to rule out the more usual sense of "marrow," for *18 Poems* is formidably Empsonian, and often exploits several senses of a word, as in the case of "worm." See "rub" in No. 8, and "maggot" in No. 1, where the meaning, "a capricious notion," seems also to apply. "Marrow" used as a verb meaning "marry" occurs in No. 9.

Fear not the screws that turn the voice,
And the face to the driven lover.

The machine metaphor is continued here, as the body is encouraged to accept its role as an instrument of creation. The witty ambiguity of "lock and vice" is not to be overlooked. The raven imprisoned by the body is associated elsewhere in *18 Poems* with sin. The "screws" are the controls that God, acting as the divine engineer, uses to make the machine of the body fulfill its function of love and procreation.

All all and all the dry worlds couple,
Ghost with her ghost, contagious man
With the womb of his shapeless people.
All that shapes from the caul and suckle,
Stroke of mechanical flesh on mine,
Square in these worlds the mortal circle.

Here the union occurs, man being called "contagious" in accordance with the "fever of life" metaphor. In the last three lines the creative force, which has begun at birth and in babyhood, operates through the act of love performed by "mechanical flesh" to complete the cycle of reproduction and renewal of life.

Flower, flower the people's fusion,
O light in zenith, the coupled bud,
And the flame in the flesh's vision.
Out of the sea, the drive of oil,
Socket and grave, the brassy blood,
Flower, flower, all all and all.

Finally, the love act is compared to flames and flowers, emblems of energy and fertility. The poem ends here with an assertion of the relationship between this consummation and the ultimate origin of the energy it embodies, which arises from the earth. Life is transmitted through the parts of the body ("socket" and "blood") and through death. The last line expresses in an incantatory fashion the ultimate mystical perception: the universality of the creative force represented by the flower. The development of the emotional climax is marked by the gradual disappearance of grammatical structure throughout the poem. It begins with a sentence, but soon becomes a series of asyntactical phrases culminating in the verbless, formless exclamation of the last line.

Explication of this sort is subject to more than its usual limitations when it is applied to *18 Poems*. According to the theory of relativity, the space-time continuum is infinite because it is curved, turning upon itself so that its end meets its beginning, like the last and first sentences of *Finnegans Wake*. It is an unbroken continuity characterized by repetition within limits. Because Thomas's poems reflect this aspect of absolute reality, they are impossible to explicate gracefully. If they made statements they would seem to progress, to move ahead on the illusionary track of time. But their contradictions and coalescences of widely-separated details express a reality whose essential nature, in spite of its apparent dynamism, is timeless and unchanging duration. In *Murder in the Cathedral* T. S. Eliot has used the image of the wheel to symbolize the cyclical reality which imprisons man within eternity:

> Neither does the actor suffer
> Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
> In an eternal action, an eternal patience
> To which all must consent that it may be willed
> And which all must suffer that they may will it,
> That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is action
> And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
> Be forever still.

Thomas, in a poem closely related to *18 Poems* in style, "I, in My Intricate Image," has used a similar symbol to represent the view of reality from which *18 Poems* is derived:

> (Turn the sea-spindle lateral,
> The grooved land rotating, that the stylus of lightning
> Dazzle this face of voices on the moon-turned table,
> Let the wax disk babble
> Shames and the damp dishonours, the relic scraping.
> These are your years' recorders. The circular world stands still.)

This image sums up the mysticism of *18 Poems*. It represents the universe as a machine, a phonograph whose power comes from a supernatural force, for it is "moon-turned." The sounds its rotation produces are meaningless, as are human activities in terms of absolute existence. And the revolving turntable, like the timeless universe perceived by the mystic who sees all creation as one, appears not to move at all.

HOWARD NEMEROV:

To Lu Chi*

Old sir, I think of you in this tardy spring,
Think of you for, maybe, no better reason
Than that the apple branches in the orchard
Bear snow not blossoms, and that this, somehow,
Seems oddly Chinese. I too, when I walk
Around the orchard, pretending to be a poet
Walking around the orchard, feel Chinese,
A silken figure on a painted screen
Who tries out with his eye the apple branches,
The last year's shriveled apples capped with snow,
The hungry birds. And then I think of you.

Through many centuries of dust, to which
We both belong, your quiet voice is clear
About the difficulties and delights
Of writing well, which are, it seems, always
The same and generally unfashionable.
In all the many times I have read your poem,
Or treatise, where the art of letters turns
To the inspection of itself—the theme
(I take your phrase) of how to hold the axe
To make its handle—your words have not failed
To move me with their justice and their strength,
Their manner gentle as their substance is
Fastidious and severe. You frighten me
When you describe the dangers of our course,
And then you bring, by precept and example,
Assurance that a reach of mastery,
Some still, reed-hidden and reflective stream

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* Author of the Wen Fu, or Prose Poem, on The Art of Letters, A.D. 302. See E. R. Hughes' *The Art of Letters* (Bollingen XXIX).

Where the heron fishes in his own image,
Always exists. I have a sight of you,
Your robes tucked in your belt, standing
Fishing that stream, where it is always dawn
With a mist beginning to be burned away
By the lonely sun. And soon you will turn back
To breakfast and the waking of the world
Where the contending war lords and the lords
Of money pay to form the public taste
For their derivative sonorities;
But yet that pure and hidden reach remains.

Lu Chi, it's said the world has changed, and that
Is doubtless something which is always said,
Though now to justify, and not in scorn,—
Yet I should think that on our common theme
That sort of change has never mattered much.
In letters as in many other trades
The active man and the contemplative
May both engage, and each in a different way
Succeed. The alphabet, the gift of god
Or of the gods (for, modern as we are,
We have no better theory yet), was not
Devised to one use only, but to all
The work that human wit could find for it,
Is honorably employed in government
And all techniques; without it, nothing. Yet
The active man, because he is active,
Expropriates as if by natural right
The common ground to his singular use,
And spits on everything he cannot use;
Not knowing, or not caring, that to use
Means also to use up. So I have read,
In works by sages of the active side,
And heard them say, that poetry is dead.
This ancient paragon and type of arts,
They claim, was magic when the world began,
And when the old magicians died in scorn
Among the ruins of unsuccessful spells,

Their childish children, living in the dawn
Of intellect and conscience, said those spells
(Which could not move a mountain or a mouse
In a real world) for courage and consolation,
Making those holy places in their hearts
Not masonry nor magic made elsewhere.
But now, in the objective, brazen light
Shed by the sciences, they say, the arts,
And poetry first, considered as their trunk,
The nearest to the root, and bearing branches
Aloft with flower and fruit, and spreading seed
To all societies, must wither away
By supersession in nature and men's hearts.
So in our day wisdom cries out in the streets
And some men regard her.
And in your day,
Lu Chi?
We know these theories, which are not new,
And know the sort of man these theories
Produce, intelligent and serviceable
So long as he can see his language as
Coin of the realm, backed up by church and state,
Each word referring to a thing, each thing
Nicely denominated by a word—
A good mind at its best, a trifle dry . . .
But in bad times, when the word of command
Fails to command, and when the word for bread
Dries and grows mouldy, he is, of all men,
The likeliest to panic as he sits
In his bomb shelter and commissions war songs
From active poets with aggressive views.
Nor on the day when all civilization
Quite visibly and audibly collapses,
When Paris burns as merrily as Sodom,
When London looks like Hell or Hiroshima,
Not even then will this man of his own
Free choice consult those who consult the source—
Who by then, in any case, can do nothing.
Meanwhile, in riches, insolence and honor

Pride is twisting his tongue. What an old joke!
These things, Lu Chi, cannot have changed so much.

What then? Nothing but this, old sir: *continue.*
And to the active man, if he should ask
(If he should bother asking) Why? say nothing.
And to the thinker, if he should ask us once
Instead of telling us, again say nothing,
But look into the clear and mirroring stream
Where images remain although the water
Passes away. Neither action nor thought,
Only the concentration of our speech
In fineness and in strength (your axe again),
Till it can carry, in those other minds,
A nobler action and a purer thought.

So much I gather from your poem: *continue.*
And now the sun shines on the apple trees,
The melting snow glitters with a great wealth,
The waxwings, drunk on last year's rotten apples,
Move through the branches, uttering pretty cries;
While portly grosbeaks, because they do not drink
That applejack, chatter with indignation.
How fine the Chinese day! delicate, jeweled,
Exactly spaced, peaceably tense with life.
I shall pretend to be a poet all
This afternoon, a Chinese poet, and
My marvelous words must bring the springtime in
And the great tree of speech to flower and fruit
Between the two realms of heaven and earth. So now
Goodbye, Lu Chi, and thank you for your poem.

GEORGE P. ELLIOTT:

Bird and Fish

"His careful hand, that swabs
and bandages their raw sores,
washes beneath his gown
his own wincing flesh.
He heals their howling hearts
with a saint's kiss."

"No. His obsessive hand
caresses the hurt it heals,
and cruelly flinches when they
would pay with pressing lips.
Hysteria cheats his heart
of gratitude's kiss."

"This man who cleaves my air,"
said the bird, "dives," said the fish,
"among my solid rocks."
"He flies on the floor of the world—"
"—who swims on the roof of the world."
His wings are his fins.

EDWARD ABBEY:

Underground in Amerigo

Alex Flack is a good fellow. I don't like him but that's not his fault. Most of the time he's all right; he tries hard to be intelligent and fair about things. He smells bad only when he's coming up out of a black dive and whimpering about his wife. And what a sad, ravaged face he has: like a cartogram of the *malpais:* ancient lava, mesquite, dinosaur tracks. His eyes are small, crinkled, clever, always full of blood and cigarette smoke; the tear ducts are usually puffed up a little with pollen from the Chinese elm. In season, naturally. He's only about thirty years old.

I was inspecting my favorite junkyard that afternoon when he came along in his 1938 Buick convertible. I could hear the rattle and clang six blocks away. This was in April: the wind was screaming down First Street in a storm of rags and old newspapers and beercans, and the dust was pretty bad. I heard a garbage can flop over and the lid come off and go banging and sliding over the cement. I kept a wary eye on my junkyard: if ever that tangled cantata of rust and iron and old boilers and smashed Chevvies and wire and rails and schoolbuses and broken derricks and ancient steam shovels and trolleycars—jagged and cutting and complicated, poisonous with rust—should stir and rumble, come to life in a jangle of percussion and the snarl of sirens, come at me lurching and clanking and screeching like a glacier of iron, where could I hide? You'd need a good deep hole: maybe some old abandoned lead mine. I looked around.

"Get in," Flack said. He reached over and opened the door and the wind caught it and slammed it against the fender. "Come on," he said. He had the top down; a curtain of fine silt was drifting over the upholstery, banking up in corners, sifting into holes, clogging the ashtrays. Flack stared at me, a dead cigarette in his mouth. "Get in," he yelled, "for Jesus Christ sake." The cigarette waggled up and down.

I got in. Flack stepped on the gas pedal and the car roared ahead, the door crashing shut before I even had a chance to reach for it. "Lock that door," Flack said without looking at me. I locked it. "It's not safe," he explained; "people always falling out." I nodded, trying to pick some of the sand out of my teeth. I thought I'd ask Flack

where we were going. I had not eaten my supper yet. I was hungry, too; these duststorms stimulate my appetite. But I was aware of a preoccupation in him which clearly meant that food could only be resented. I swallowed some of the sand and asked him where we were going. "Hey?" he said; he couldn't hear me: the wind was . . . I noticed that his eyebrows were gray with dust. The wind was making a lot of noise; at the same moment we dipped down into an underpass, while a diesel locomotive rolled over us dragging a tube full of FBI agents. Flack was screaming at me: "I like it down here," he howled; "it's nice. I feel good down here." We came up out of it into the wind and dust and yellow light again, trapped in a channel of racing automobiles. Five o'clock traffic. A red light glimmered ahead of us, swinging wildly in the wind; everybody raced toward it.

The cars started to pile up, condense and telescope: I heard the wham and crump of merging steel. Red brakelights flashing; I braced my feet against the floorboards and shut my eyes. Flack sang the tune he had brought back from Cornwall: "A randy dandy dandy O, A whet of ale and brandy O, With a rumbelow and a Westward Ho! and heave my mariners all O!" The world swung suddenly on its lateral axis, I fell against Flack—sometimes he smells like nothing so much as an old davenport—and opened my eyes, pulling myself back toward my own side of the seat. We were bouncing down somebody's back alley past overturned garbage cans and tattered circus posters rippling on garage doors: I thought of Creekside, Pennsylvania. We appeared to be chasing a gray cat. "She'll never make it," Flack yelled happily. I heard a squawl as the cat disappeared under our right fender; I looked back and saw it skinning up the trunk of a telephone pole, looking after us.

Flack had changed; he used to have the utmost respect for the dignity and security of cats.

Flack followed the alley for several blocks, driving too fast, crossing the intersecting streets without a glance in either direction. This alarmed me a little; I was certain he was not drunk. I mean abnormally drunk—seeded, liberated. Not that. But then I supposed that he was still upset about Ernie.

We pulled into a back lot and stopped against someone's Ford sedan, nudging it ahead a foot or so. There were several other cars about. Some that I knew personally. The spirits had temporarily left them. "Come on," Flack said; he got out on his side. I waited, trying to remember something. The wind was still pouring around

us; when I lifted my arm I saw the dust drip from it. I don't particularly mind dust but I knew this didn't belong to me. Some bean farmer's . . .

"Come on," Flack said, grinning at me through a mask of powdered topsoil: the grinning ghost. "Come on, come on." But he's always impatient. He stared at me as if I were somewhat difficult to see. A translucent image. But of course the light was bad, a mere vapor of dust and wind. I got out of the car and followed him around a corner of the house and down a flight of concrete steps and into a basement apartment that had an unhealthy, familiar smell. But it wasn't my own place; I live at the other end of Amerigo, near the sewage treatment plant. There's a good view of the mountains from there, and the rent is rational. Does it smell? Sure—but what doesn't?

Flack entered without knocking and I followed. The place had a submarine atmosphere, a solution of cigarette smoke and human voices and a dense amber light exuded by a complexus of plastic and brass tubing set in the ceiling. I blinked my eyes and Flack was lost. *Louis Armstrong*. Cautiously I began to breathe and then a pretty and intelligent girl offered me a glass of red wine. I took it and asked her if she had anything to eat. Louis Armstrong howling through the smoke and flesh in high fidelity: I had a momentary vision of perspiring radio tubes.

The kitchen was almost as crowded as the front room but the noise was not so bad. The girl opened a refrigerator and invited me to serve myself and then she drifted off. Most of the people around me seemed familiar enough, yet I could not have positively identified a single one of them. Only Flack, whom I could not see. I thought I heard him bawling away in another room: "Yes, violets! One bunch of violets! That's right—"

I started to construct a sandwich of cheese—jack cheese—and imitation pumpernickel. No butter: but I got along quite decently . . .

"I don't care!" I heard Flack shouting from somewhere beyond my field of vision, "I don't give a good goddamn—yes, I'll pay for it, good Christ. Now you got the address?"

I assembled my sandwich, drank some of the wine, took a bite from the sandwich. Near me on the kitchen table some people were playing with a scintillation counter, pointing it at each other and comparing intensities of radiation. The young man operating the instrument had it aimed like a gun at the chest of the girl beside him. "You're hot, kid," he was saying; "my God, but you're hot—

look at this." The others squinted at the meter, grinning. "My old man owns the biggest uranium mine in Colorado," the girl said; "no wonder I'm hot. How do you read me?"

"You're hot, kid," the young man said admiringly; "my God, but you really are hot."

I stared at them, chewing on my sandwich. From somewhere beyond the haze I could hear Flack: "Yes, two one three Pine. Yes —that's right, two one three. Yes—okay, okay—"

The young man glanced up, saw me staring at him. His grin faded for a moment, then came back. He pointed the machine at me. I left the kitchen, taking my wine and sandwich.

In the front room the noise and smoke and animal pressure was almost overpowering. I looked around for Flack but couldn't see him. I sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall and shut my eyes; I couldn't see anything anyway. Somebody stumbled over my feet, then came back and stepped on them. I did not look up.

On my right they were discussing Ernie's case but that didn't interest me very much. I had known him but not very well; to me he'd always seemed a little intangible. Apparitional. He was kind to me once, exceedingly kind, in a way I'd been taught to regard as saintly but impossible. And always gentle, courteous, interested in what I had to say. In fact I think he was the only person who ever did listen to me. Flack is my friend, of course, but he never pays any attention to what I say. And I talk so seldom, too. About Ernie —but does anyone really care . . . ?

A suggestion of confusion: I found it hard to follow the conversations around me. They said: *Him? I heard he traded his MG for an MIG. Brainwashed. When the Explainer tried to talk to him he spit in his face. That's what I heard.* And: *It's this way: Friday's the Islamic holy day, right? T.G.I.F. Saturday for the Jews, Sonnesday for the bloody Christers. Yes? Nobody wants Monday. But nobody.* And: *I prefer New York because there I feel close to the people. People—? Yes, the masses. You mean the Puerto Ricans? What? I said, You mean the Puerto—forget it, sweetheart. What? Forget it . . .*

About Ernie: I hadn't known that he wrote poetry until a year ago. He never mentioned it to me. Flack told me; Flack thinks his stuff is pretty good. Flack gave me this little book that he'd had printed in Denver at his own expense. Full of Ernie's poems. Dedicated to Flack. Written by Ernie. I read them, sure.

I finished my wine and looked around for the pretty and intelligent girl who had . . . I couldn't see her anywhere. Nor Flack, either. The room was so crowded with people, though, you couldn't be certain they were not there. But no doubt he had already found her and they'd found the bedroom. Well: I didn't care. No affair of mine. He's very active, my friend Flack.

On my left they were talking about Heidegger and the Problem of Bing. Or was it Bean? I thought of the wind roaring outside, of the dust rising in clouds from the plains of Texas and Colorado and Oklahoma. I could still taste the sand in my teeth.

The doorbell rang. A girl opened the door and through the smoke and shadows I could see a boy standing there holding something in his hand. He mumbled to the girl and she turned around and called for my friend. "Alexander Flack," she yelled, "Alexander Flack." It was the same girl who had given me the wine and offered me the treasures of her refrigerator; she saw me staring at her and gave me a smile. "Alexander Flack," she called again, smiling at me. I felt relieved.

Flack appeared, pushing and shoving through the crowd. He was sweating and his eyes seemed more bloodshot and smoky than ever. When he noticed the girl smiling at me he turned his head and looked at me too, and grinned and winked. There was still dust on his face. He spoke to the boy and the boy gave him what he held in his hand, apparently flowers, for I heard Flack say, "These the violets?" and the boy nodded. They were wrapped in green tissue paper. Flack reached into his pocket and pulled out some silver. "Thirty-nine cents," he said. "Right?" The boy shook his head and mumbled something that I couldn't hear. "Eh?" said Flack; "how's that again?" The boy's lips moved. "Now wait a minute," Flack said, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. "You wouldn't try to cheat me now, would you, you little pimply-faced crook? They said thirty-nine over the telephone. What the hell kind of racket is this anyhow?" The boy spoke quietly. "Delivery charge!" said Flack indignantly. "One dollar for delivering one miserable little bunch of violets? You must be dreaming, kid." The boy spoke again, timidly but insistently, holding out his hand. "Over my dead body," Flack roared; "over my dead body! Now get out of here before I wring your neck!" And he stuffed the bunch of violets into his jacket pocket and raised both hands toward the boy's face. The boy backed away, turned and scrambled up the steps outside, disappearing. Flack

slammed shut the door and came back into the room with a dull, sick grin on his face, looking for me.

I stood up and gave my empty glass to a woman near me and then stepped past Flack without speaking to him—he put his hand on my arm and I shook it off—and went out of that cave and up the cement steps outside. I found the boy starting to let air out of one of the tires on Flack's car. I paid him a dollar and he climbed on his motorbike and went away.

The wind was still blowing but no longer so crazily, and most of the dust had dropped out of the air. I brushed the sand off the seat in Flack's car and sat down and filled my pipe, waiting. The sun had evidently gone down; from where I sat, surrounded by walls, I could not see the western horizon. But the sky remained yellow, dense, close above my head. I thought of Flack and of Flack's small, desperate wife; then I thought of my own wife; then I thought of Ernie again.

The trouble with Ernie—well, nobody knows why he did it. As for his poetry, I could never understand that either. It reminded me of Blake and of Mary Baker Eddy, that's all I can say. Which means simply that I was never really much interested. The awkward thing about Ernie's case, from Flack's point of view, is that Ernie used Flack's gun.

I lit my pipe and in the flare of the match saw the key in the ignition. I decided to steal Flack's car and go on home. I slid over behind the wheel and started the engine.

Flack came up the steps. "Wait a minute," he shouted; "wait for me, goddamnit." He staggered a little in the dusk. "I don't want to stay here either," he shouted, opening the door on the driver's side. "Move over." I moved over and he took the wheel. "A terrible place," he said. "I know how you feel. But I had to see that girl. That's all. I'll take you home now if that's where you want to go." He spoke without looking at me, backing the car out of the lot. He smashed into a garage door on the other side of the alley, then started the car forward. "I suppose that's where you want to go?" he said. "Home, back to the wife and kids?" I told him yes, though I have no kids and not much of a wife. "Don't blame you," he said, staring through the dusty windshield as the car bounced and rattled down the alley. "Don't blame you at all." The alley seemed alive with black shapes, shadows, moving things. I wanted to remind him to turn on the headlights but he thought of it himself after he knocked over an empty garbage can.

When we came to the main street he turned left, toward the heart of the city, beginning to sing again: "A randy dandy dandy O! with a rumbelow and a Westward Ho! . . ." He cruised under a redlight while opposing automobiles set up a clamor of horns and squealing brakes. "Lock that door," he shouted at me; "not safe; opens when least expected." I locked the door. We dived down into the cool dark underpass again. "Hey!" yelled Flack, "this is good, this is just all right." The car rose, emerging into the fire and epileptic neon of the city, and Flack began to frown. "No good," he shouted; "won't do. Unfit for human consumption." I shrugged my shoulders.

We crossed the river on the new four-lane bridge. As we approached the corner where I expected him to turn he speeded up the car. I asked him what he was up to now. "Won't take a minute," he replied; "just a little piece of business." He drove past my street without turning and on up the hill toward the ragged fringe of the city. I cursed him silently but without serious intent; I didn't care whether I ever went home again or not.

At the top of the hill Flack turned the car to the right and we drove beyond the housing projects and shopping centers and beyond a few scattered shacks and on north, following the dirt road that went along the edge of the bluff above the river. The wind seemed to have died away, given up, but the sky was worse than ever, a ghastly spectacle of yellow and grimy red, like the blood-flecked yolk of a fertilized egg. Floating in on the wave of darkness from the east was a little icy fragment of the moon.

Flack stopped the car about three miles north of the city. He shut off the lights and shut off the engine and we sat there for a while listening to the rattle of cottonwood leaves and the oily surge of the river sliding past the mudbanks—like a breathing animal. I could smell the silty water and could feel the faint resonant tremor of the earth beneath it. The blue twilight, warm and rich with odors, deep in its silences, gathered around us, intoxicating, stupefying, while Flack breathed noisily and asthmatically through his clogged nostrils and sagging mouth, like a man etherized. I began to feel uncomfortable.

Flack sighed heavily and rubbed his face with both hands. "Come on," he said. He opened the door and got out slowly. "Come on, got to show you something." He stared at me dully, as if I were an entirely unimpressive stranger. "You coming?"

I shrugged my shoulders again, the typical response of an ineffectual man, and got out of the car, feeling hungry and irritable. I guessed that the easiest way out of this would be to humor him.

Flack walked away from the car, away from the road and toward one of the stony little hills on the west. I followed him, trying to avoid the prickly pear and yucca that grew, somehow, in this waste of sand and rock and old lava. We trudged up a short slope, slipping now and then on the loose stones, and stopped near a juniper crouching in forlorn isolation on the summit of the hill. First I saw a wooden cross sticking up out of the ground near the juniper, and then the fresh burial mound extending from the foot of the cross to the roots of the tree. So here is where he planted Ernie, I thought.

"Read it," Flack said, staring down at the grave.

"Read what?" I blinked hopefully. "Read what?" I said, since Flack made no answer. He pointed to the cross and I stepped close to it and bent down and read the words inscribed on the horizontal arm, apparently burnt into the wood with a hot awl or chisel:

ERNEST THOMISON FLACK, 1931-1949
Born of the earth, I give back to the earth these ashy bones, this troubled flesh; but my triumphant spirit you shall never find.

I backed away from the cross, rubbing my nose respectfully, and looked at Flack. He continued to stare at the grave. "What do you think about that?" he said.

I hesitated. "He was a strange boy."

"Strange?" Flack grunted, scratched at his crotch. "He was a marvelous boy. He had something." Scratching vigorously, Flack cleared his throat and spat to one side. "He was something. An angel, maybe. Who knows?" He scratched at himself with an irrational, unnecessary vigor.

Okay, I was thinking, so you had a crazy brother. Who doesn't? Aloud I said: "You—he wrote the . . . ?"

"What?" Suddenly, Flack stopped scratching himself. "He wrote the epitaph?"

"The epitaph," I said. "Yes."

"Yes, sure, who else? Am I a bloody poet?" Flack groped through his pockets, found the crumpled withered bunch of violets. "Sure he

wrote it, the wise little bastard. Did it all himself—you think he wanted my help? Did everything but shovel himself in." Flack took a step toward the grave, went down awkwardly on one knee, then on the other, and deposited the violets on the bosom of the mound. "The tricky little bastard," he mumbled, sagging there.

"Wait a minute," I said. I stared at him, kneeling like a contrite bull between the cross and the static agony of the juniper tree. "Wait a minute," I said, "let me get this straight." I could hear, from down by the river, some crazy bird squawking in the darkness among the willows. "Do you mean to say—?" Flack seemed to have forgotten me; half-fallen in the twilight, he breathed thickly, muttering obscenities. "Look," I said, "did you *know* he was going to—? You *knew* all along what he was going to do?" Flack did not answer. "Is that right?" I said.

He pushed himself up then, grunting, and turned toward me; his eyes were half-closed. "Let's go back," he said. "It's late." He sighed like a tired man and made a move toward the car, then stopped, looking back at me. "Come on," he said. "Let's go."

I tried to answer but could say nothing.

"Let's go, let's go," he said.

I found my voice. "I'll walk."

"What? You'll what?"

"I said I'll walk."

Flack shrugged his shoulders, paused, started off again. And stopped again. "Don't be a goddamn fool," he said. "Come on, I'll take you home."

"I don't want to go home."

"Well, neither do I," Flack said. He was silent for a while, considering. "Tell you what," he said—"let's go somewhere, have a drink first. Huh? What do you say?"

I tried to think of an answer to that. But there wasn't any; or only one.

On the way back to the car old Flack began to sing again: something about a bunch of drunken mariners, retribution, and the black eyes of a London dock-whore.

STEPHEN STEPANCHEV:

The Fall of a Saint

She made a specialty of saints,
And, when he came out of the heart's west,
An uncombed citizen of grass—
Unshod, his days in flames—she ran

And seized his dusty hands and said,
"Look, look!" and pressed them to her breasts,
Which rose and rouged as she sprang the beast
From its cage and sprang his tallying blood.

She was amused to find a red
Claw mangling tulips in the blue
Grotto of his mind, the oil
Of violets sputtering as it boiled.

But, when the four-legged beast had done,
He clouded, spoke of knives and rope.
"No, *papacito,* no!" she cried.
Her painted, misplaced mouth now broke;

Her cheeks ran black with her mascaraed
Tears; her eyes spoke skies and yew.
He saw, at last, warm disarray
In what had been a stellar blaze

Of platinum, a tape-corrected
Voice, a practiced gesture, smile.
And, well, the saint's slide was her rise,
I think; saints blaze below their pride.

The Thistle

tu ad liberandum suscepturus
hominem non horruisti
Virginis uterum

That scent of Mary's hair and sea! Those sudden
Windows on man's plow! That stretch and shape
Of eye, ear, hand, and tongue! And words, my God—
What candled words!—those smoky thirty years!
When nails, man's rusty crown, a searching spear
Withdrew me to your gold-leaf walls, I wept—
Defeat recedes, at last, and smokeless flame,
An angel's flute, this clockless crystal dome
Displace the barbed blue thistle of man's day.

Sweet is this haloed haven, sweet the dance
Of spirit, father, but the wound awakes,
Remembrance breaks me, bringing sense of sense,
The ticking world by which your forms are known:
The spun white rose of favor, flesh of foam,
Plum-blossoms stirring to a rolling sun,
A wheatfield whispering in a harvest wind,
A pine tree shaking incense on the road,
And man's barbed thistle signing every road.

One evening, in an aureate dust, I climbed
The road to agony as lambs ran by
From bleating fields and peasants flung their seeds—
The year was new—and watched me stumble, bleed.
And she beside a hut, a golden rose,
Waved courage to me as her sworn eyes spoke,
And, yes, I saw she knew my ecstasy,
The reaches of my fear. But at her side
Man's thistle grew, the color of her eyes.

JANET FISCALINI:

Undone

A dirty camel, turtle with a beard—
No epithet
Quite fit, but normal men would jump absurd
Vehicles to avoid him. He suffered it,
Saving his days of love and wit, expecting
The utterly clear morning:

Wakened from rich compassion, she would turn
And cry for wonder,
Seeing his manner gentled, his great hump gone,
His eyes and all his textures wholly tender.
The black hold broken, he would tell her tales
Of envious childhood trolls.

But then the game years ran away for good
In murky cities,
In provinces of churches and wild mud,
While always sensing what exorbitancies
He hoped for, even gracious women shuddered
And closed their angry doors.

RICHARD F. HUGO:

North

He will bomb the final town
With questions of beyond. What trail
Is open now? Does he need a gun?
He will be too vague about the gold
And leave too many clues
And be remembered well by eskimos.

He will go where grass is gesture only
And the tricky wind
Will amplify his breathing to a roar.
His sacks of extra weight
Will be forgotten by the stone
He thinks he won't forget.

He will think strange things
Toward the end, that he is welcome
Anywhere, or a pygmy prince,
A master of the avalanche
Beginning in the stars
He flicked into the sky when king.

He will die as warm greys take
The snow and his eyes in leisure,
Hearing the border beating
With patrols, and somewhere
Not for him, the grief exploding
In the cliff attenuated sea.

La Push

Fish swim onto sand in error.
Birds need only the usual wind
To be fanatic, no bright orange
Or strange names. Waves fall
From what had been flat water
And a child sells herring
Crudely at your door.

The store has a candy turnover
Amazing to the proprietor.
He expected, when he came
A Nordic rawness, serrated shore,
A broken moon, artifacts
And silence, large sales of corn.

Smelt are trapped in the river
By a summer habit, limit
Of old netting rights ignored.
Who but an officed lawyer
Far away has read the treaty,
His sense of rightness rounded
In a bar? The broker's pier
Is measuring the day in kings and jacks.

Your land ends at this border,
Water and stone, mobile in tide,
Diffuse in storm, but here.
The final fist of island rock
Does not strike space away. Swim
And you are not in your country.

A District in the City

People say his painting caught so much:
"A Sarcous Image Wrapped in Black Canal."
He came hungry for the lines
Of wintered trawls, poles like bleak sticks
In a burned field. But above him
On the high bridge, autos poured
A sunday monotone. The day was sunless
So the shadow on the district came out stain.

Line and color, yes. The frantic white in black,
But not the building dated 1903 in stone
And jammed between canal and hill,
The man who saw each jumper pass
The lumber mill: the man in '40
Yelled and just last August
Or the year before, that nurse went
With her skirt puffed like a chute.

He should have come here for no reason
Or for silly reasons, to eat bad food
Or learn the way to break a heavy load
From the foreman high on muscatel
And beer. There is no mayor,
No council. No group is planning change.
The high bridge will insist tomorrow
And the black canal is moving like a month.

MARTIN A. HANSEN:

The Soldier and the Girl

Translated by Richard B. Vowles

In the compartment sat a soldier, an old woman, and two fat men playing cards. The fatter of the two had a small, handsome boy with him. His hair was curly and black and his eyes were just as dark. The boy sat and looked at the soldier, and the soldier looked back at him.

The soldier's brown uniform was old and ragged. It already lacked one button, and he sat and twisted away at the next one while he looked at the boy. On his chest he wore a medal.

The old woman was asleep. When the train slowed up or stopped, she sounded as if she were the very engine itself.

The little train stopped often. Either it was someone with a lunch box for the engineer, or there was a rock on the track. The train reminded one of an old dog jogging a few steps at a time alongside the roadway ditch, stopping here and there to savor the smells of his youth.

I have never in my life seen such a handsome little boy, thought the soldier. It's remarkable that he has such a father or, more correctly said, that the father has such a son.

It was plain that the father was the bigger soak of the two card players. He had been drinking—you could smell and see that; but this was an old story with him.

I wish he was my son, said the soldier to himself. He looks like a musician or a man that's written music, a composer that I saw a picture of when he was a boy. Like that one. I believe the little fellow is musical. Surely he can play the flute. I'll give him a button!

The soldier tore a button clear off and extended it to the boy.

"It's been in the war," he said, "but don't you care about that. The button is good enough still."

The small boy was happy. He doubtless thought it was made of gold, which you could see better if you rubbed it a little on your shirt. He touched his father and wanted to say something. And the father put his hand on the boy's head and stroked his black hair. The little one had deformed ears, the soldier noticed.

No, thought the soldier, he can't play the flute. I was wrong as usual.

But the father isn't so bad after all, even if his heart is stewed in aqua vitae and his beard is so stubbly that you could spear a fly on every hair. He had put down the cards and was playing with the lad and his button. They were happy.

The men and the boy got off at the next stop.

"Wait," called the soldier. "You can have my medal."

But they didn't hear him, and this time the locomotive pulled out with a wild and feverish speed.

Now the soldier and the old woman were alone together. She had awakened and she took two apples from her basket and threw one over to him.

"Thanks," he said. "Too bad I didn't think of it in time. He should have had my medal."

"You ought to keep it," said the old woman. "You must have got it for bravery."

"Oh, stuff," answered the soldier. He bit into his apple. It was the biggest and the sweetest one.

And so he sat and looked at everything they were passing. Rising fields and descending fields. Red fields, brown fields—and black where they were plowed. In the distance there were houses that looked at the soldier with gable faces and window eyes. And from above the houses a wood began and ran down toward the train to swallow it up. They were swallowed, and a little later they were out in the open again. There were the same clouds on the other side. You took the sky with you to a new landscape.

"It must be here!" the soldier burst forth. He grasped his medal and stood up. Then he opened the compartment door.

"Wouldn't it be better if you got them to stop?" said the old woman.

"That's reasonable," he said. "But I have to get off right here."

It was an old-fashioned, locked compartment, so they couldn't get hold of the conductor.

"He's sitting up front," said the old woman. She understood that the soldier was impatient.

"You're a brick," answered the soldier. Then he jumped up on the seat and pulled the emergency brake.

The train stopped, but it was a little while before anyone came. They were looking first to see if any grass had got twisted about the axles.

"Thanks for the apple and the help," said the soldier.

"You're welcome," she said. "Are you going to visit somebody here?"

"No," he answered, "I've never been here before. Oh, maybe in my dreams. I saw a pond down there, and hills. So I wanted to get off."

"I can understand that," she said.

"Good for you!" he exclaimed. "Yes, when I was in Hell I thought a lot about a pond with hills beyond—and nothing else. Just like this."

"But why have you still got your uniform on?" she said.

"I can't get it off," answered the soldier. "I can never get it off again."

"Well," said the old woman, "if I was thirty years younger I could get it off you."

"You lovely girl, you," he said, and swung her up and kissed her. And since he was a tall soldier, the old woman was dizzy before he put her down again.

"I won't forgive you for that in a hurry," she gasped.

"That's only an introduction," he said.

Just at that moment the engineer arrived, and since the old woman stood nearest the door he said to her, "Are you the one who pulled?"

"Good gracious! At my age? But thanks for the compliment!" said the old woman, whose cheeks were now as red as her apples.

"It was me," said the soldier. "This is my stop."

"Well, this is a damned expensive business," said the engineer. "We don't stop just anywhere. There's the regulations. You've got money?"

"Sure, piles of it in prospect," answered the soldier. "I was in a big place where they buy skeletons. They didn't need mine right then, as far as I could understand. But they took an option on it. And if I did get away with only one or two interesting wounds which have grown together a bit—and quite askew—I've got priority. So everything can be arranged."

"Naturally," said the engineer.

"You shall have two of my sweet apples," said the old woman.

"They're just as sweet as she is," said the soldier.

"There's the regulations. That's the thing," said the engineer. "But that medal you have. Wouldn't you part with it? Then maybe things could be arranged in a friendly way."

"Sorry," said the soldier, "if it were a button, it would be thinkable. But there are medal regulations too, and one of them says that medals can only be bestowed on small, black-haired boys who are deaf-and-dumb."

"Shame on you!" exclaimed the old woman. "If I had the money, I'd take care of this. One who has fought for his country—"

"Stuff!" said the soldier.

The engineer sat down on the step to think, and along came the conductor, who also sat down. Nothing more was said about the medal.

"The thing is," said he, "we've got to get there on time, and yet we've got to write this up and make a report. And since you can't pay anything, we'd better take you to the end of the line."

"Then I'll have to start a civil war," said the soldier, "and that's not so good when a man is normally law-abiding. But let it go. I don't want to delay you any longer."

He pressed the old woman's hand and said, "Promise to be faithful to me and wait for me."

"Yes," she said, and cried.

Then the soldier took the engineer's hand and said: "You've taken this nobly. Now don't think about it anymore. I'll come and pay as soon as the matter of the skeleton is settled, and that can't be so long. And as you know, a soldier is always as good as his word."

Then, after shaking the conductor's hand, he saluted, turned about, and walked away down the tracks.

The old woman stood with her head out the compartment window and kept her eyes on him as the train pulled away. Then she got coal dust in one eye and had to sit down and look for her handkerchief.

The soldier walked and looked around him and talked to himself: "It looks like it. How much it looks like it! It must be here. Lucky I came this way. One might have suffered a long time, until one didn't care anymore. Nice people, that they let me off. Remarkable how kind people can be. Yes, it looks like it. Some woods, closing around you there. The hills there, with no sign of houses. And the clouds there, too. Seeing the clouds made me think of it. They moved along with us. They're the way they should be, all right. They look as if they'd bring cold with them. They won't last forever—but certainly long enough."

Thus he walked and mumbled to himself until he was opposite the pond. Then he left the tracks and went across the plowed ground.

He was tall and tough, but he got quite out of breath walking in the heavy earth.

"There it is," he thought. "I've gone farther than most of the others, yet it isn't long before one gives up. But it smells good, the earth."

When he got there, he saw that the pond was a marl-pit. There was water in it, and reeds, and water-lilies that had seen their best days. Alongside the pit ran an old hedge, a rampart with a couple of trees along it.

"Yes, it must be here," he said; "a comfortable place with good company."

He was thinking of the trash that floated on the edge of the marl-pit and even out upon the water. There were some rusty bedsprings, rotting sacks, pails shot with holes, a broken shovel, fragments of china, pieces of glass. That's what first caught the eye. And on the branches of a little alder tree, overhanging the water, were the shreds of a skirt.

"Good day, Madame," said the soldier to them. "Thanks for the invitation. I think I'll feel at home here. Chances are I'll fit in."

He sat down in the grass under one of the willow trees and unknotted his boots. Since they were muddy he kicked them off without using his hands. One of them rolled almost all the way down to the bed springs.

"That's good," he said and took the medal off his chest.

"Nothing wrong with this medal, honored marl-pit," he said. "It wasn't so cheap. But it never was as useful as some of the other things in your collection. Well, it's all the same."

The soldier flung the medal out into the water. It sank into the marl-pit, ruffling the bright surface of the water and briefly disturbing some straws on the edge.

The soldier lit a cigarette and stretched out on the slope, with his hands under his head. It was chilly toward evening, but he didn't mind. He could lie here and see over the hills. There were no houses and trees. Not a thing. He stared at the naked, quiet earth.

The clouds had moved. Now there was a little red in them. They had changed and would never be the same, but he could still recognize them.

The soldier fell asleep. Since his cigarette was hand-rolled it went out by itself. His sleep was a little restless, but soon twilight came

and united him with the marl-pit and the other things, and now he himself resembled the bare, quiet earth.

When he woke up, it was almost pitch-dark. He fumbled about, got hold of an old cabbage stalk, and pulled himself to a sitting position. He held on to the cabbage stalk with both hands and looked all about him. His hat had fallen off and the gentle fingers of the evening wind stirred his hair a little. The moon was just over the hills. It had pursued the sun most of the day and was now on its way down.

The soldier felt himself, and it was he. Then he lit a cigarette and lay down again. He had frequently wakened and thought he lay in a place like this, but it was always somewhere else. This time he was right.

"This certainly isn't according to the program," said the soldier.

And so he lay and listened to a mouse or some other small creature rustling around one of his boots.

"Who are you?" said a quiet voice from the direction of the marl-pit.

The soldier lay and stared. He took hold of the cabbage stalk again. But he couldn't discover anything.

"I'm a soldier," he said.

"Should I be afraid of you?" the voice asked.

"No," he said.

"But you have hurt people, haven't you?" asked the voice.

It was a girl's voice. Not very loud, but clear. And the soldier still could see nothing.

"Can you see how the moon shines?" he said. "It must have just come up."

"I lie here and can see nothing," she answered.

The soldier quietly turned his collar up and pulled his coat tighter about him. Now he missed the two buttons. It was cold.

"You mustn't be afraid to say so," said the girl's voice. "You were a soldier and couldn't very well do anything else."

"Tell me something, my girl," answered the soldier.

"Ah," said the voice, "there's so little to tell."

Then it was quiet for so long that the mouse resumed his business with the boot.

"Say something more," spoke the voice.

"You shall have what you wish, my girl," said the soldier, "but what do you wish?"

"Darling, you've spoken again."

"You women!" said the soldier. "But you've got a quiet and good home there."

"If I weren't so alone," she answered. "Now you're here though."

"Yes," he said.

"You've probably traveled all about, seen all kinds of things, and experienced lots of evil," she said. "And I've been lying here longing, longing, all the time."

"I'm being mustered out here," said the soldier.

"Oh, it's so little," said the girl voice. "I wasn't very old. I did so want to be happy and live."

"Trash and bedsprings! At ease!" muttered the soldier.

"To think that you've come," said the girl. "No one has come since they gave me a place here."

"Rags and tatters. Dismissed!" mumbled the soldier.

"I so much wanted to live," said the girl voice. "But then I got afraid and ran down here into the water."

"I'm not asking you any questions, my girl," said the soldier.

"Dear one, now I lie quietly. And I think I see the moon now."

"I was wrong before," he said. "The moon hasn't just risen. It's about to go down. I don't care for that red color in it. But it'll soon be down."

"I'll just lie here and think that you are here," she said.

The moon was almost down. But it was still mirrored in the marl-pit that lay before the soldier. It looked as if his medal had risen to the surface and was being melted down.

RICHARD B. VOWLES:

Martin A. Hansen:

Danish Craftsman and Mystic

Martin A. Hansen was born in 1909, just south of Køge on the main Danish island of Zealand. His was the apparently inevitable fate of so many Scandinavian writers, that of being born of the soil and for the soil. Yet he escaped to a fruitful life of teaching in Copenhagen elementary schools, at which he continued until 1946, though he had begun to write in his early twenties when the impulse came "like an eruption, a thief in the night."

Not unexpectedly, Hansen's first two novels, *Surrender (Nu opgiver han,* 1935) and its sequel *The Colony (Kolonien,* 1937), deal exhaustively with the changing agricultural picture in the thirties and the failure of an experiment in collective farming. By the very dialectical process of fiction, Hansen was persuaded from socialism, epic realism, and the attenuated boredom of the soil, without losing sight of its magic as the envelope of birth and death.

Reaction followed, coupled with the indirection required in a German-occupied Denmark. *Jonathan's Journey (Jonatans Rejse,* 1941) is a fantasy which deals as amiably as possible with the worst threats of a scientific rationale; *Happy Christopher (Lykkelige Kristoffer,* 1945), another picaresque chronicle, raises the problem of a somewhat quixotic hero of Reformation times, attempting to affirm his ideals in an atmosphere of dissolution and despair. The war had two strong, if divisive effects on Hansen. He worked indefatigably and heroically for the underground press. At the same time he escaped the present into a medieval past which came to mean more and more to him. Denmark was always a quiet passion with Hansen --its flora, birdlife, geology, climate, Viking remains, national temperament—but now its Romanesque survivals attracted him, and in particular the luminous frescoes of Danish country churches. Here was the fusion of folk and craft that came to be the keystone of his writing art.

In Europe Hansen is best known for his psychological novel *The Liar (Løgneren,* 1950) which, through the somewhat crabbed interior monologue of a school teacher, conveys an astonishingly rich picture of the whole culture of a small Danish island. In Denmark Hansen

is perhaps most admired for *Serpent and Bull (Orm og tyr,* 1952), a kind of lesser *Golden Bough,* a mixture of myth and folk iconography which led him, like Tolstoy, to examine the social validity of writing as a way of life.

But it is as a teller of tales that Hansen will live. For here one finds a quality of ironic *Innerlichkeit* which is not only reminiscent of Kierkegaard but derivative, in company with the innocence and surprise of Hans Christian Andersen. But what transformed Hansen's fiction was his experience with indigenous Romanesque art, which forced the metaphysical into the concrete and immediate to impart a new clarity of vision. His greatness lies in two collections, *The Thorn Bush (Tornbusken,* 1946) and *The Partridge (Agerhønen,* 1947), from which latter volume "The Soldier and the Girl" is taken. Encounter with death has never been conveyed in such a gentle transcendentalism.

The epilogue is tragedy. Martin A. Hansen died of a kidney ailment in June, 1955. He was forty-five. Since then, two posthumous collections have been pieced together, to complete the record, not to enhance his reputation in Denmark, where his home near the cathedral town of Roskilde is increasingly the goal of Danish pilgrims on bicycles.

One problem with Scandinavian writers is that they seem so inescapably Scandinavian. Not so with Hansen, in spite of his love for Denmark. His craft is limpid, exacting, and universal.

WAYNE BURNS:

'In the Penal Colony': Variations on a Theme by Octave Mirbeau

To the best of my knowledge the name of Octave Mirbeau has never been associated with that of Franz Kafka. Indeed it may seem that Mirbeau, with his anarchistic ideas, his unrestrained sadism, and his crudely naturalistic techniques, is about as far removed from Kafka as any writer could be. And so in a sense he is—though not quite so far as might at first be supposed. For Kafka read Kropotkin, attended anarchist meetings, and recognized the sadistic component in modern civilization (*e.g.,* in a conversation with Janouch he described the Marquis de Sade as "the patron of our era"). Moreover, as Max Brod has pointed out, Kafka was willing to put up with any kind of writing, so long as it was sincere. He paid little heed to "all the talk about 'standards,' 'literary hallmarks,' 'distinction of rank' . . . He could be carried away by a turn of speech in a newspaper article . . . or dilate on the crowded life, the eye for drama, in some novel by some author or another who was generally sneered at as 'cheap.'"

In view of these facts, attested by Brod himself, it is perhaps not too surprising that Kafka was drawn to Mirbeau, or that, as I shall try to show, he based *In the Penal Colony* on Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899; translated by Alvah C. Bessie as *The Torture Garden,* Citadel Press, 1948). The surprising thing, as I see it, is that Brod nowhere mentions the name of Mirbeau, and in his remarks on *In the Penal Colony* has gone out of his way to dismiss the efforts of various critics to link Kafka's art with that of Poe or other writers who express what he calls the "night side of life."

The Torture Garden, described by James G. Huneker as "a book conceived by a Torquemada of sadism to show the cruelty of all governments," opens with a discussion of murder in which it is argued that "murder is the very bedrock of our social institutions, and consequently the most imperious necessity of civilized life. If it no longer existed, there would be no governments of any kind, by virtue of

the admirable fact that crime in general and murder in particular are not only their excuse, but their only reason for being . . . So, instead of seeking to eliminate murder, it is imperative that it be cultivated with intelligence and perseverance. I know no better culture-medium than law." With due allowance for Mirbeau's irony, this is a fair statement of his theme, which he develops through the Candide-like experiences of his narrator—first as the narrator follows Eugene Mortain through the machinations of social and political life, to discover the nature of reality in his native France; then as the narrator (in the guise of scientist-explorer) follows Clara through the East and to "the Garden," there to discover that the universe is "an immense, inexorable torture-garden . . . What I saw today, and what I heard, exists, and cries and howls beyond this garden, which is no more than a symbol to me of the entire earth."

In a general way, then, *The Torture Garden* anticipates *In the Penal Colony* in both theme and structure—with the latter half, or the torture garden section of the novel, corresponding to the whole of *In the Penal Colony*. "Armed with letters of recommendation to the authorities at Ceylon" (cf. Kafka's explorer), Mirbeau's narrator sets out (again like Kafka's explorer) "to study the various systems of penitentiary administration in use there, and their application to the social system." Moreover he is obliged (once again like Kafka's explorer) to witness ritual executions (performed by an "old executioner") designed to convert him to the traditional religious and cultural values of the country—which are in danger of being subverted by newer, more humanitarian values. The main difference is that Kafka's scientist-explorer remains both a scientist and an explorer, and is thus able to achieve an objective depiction of the reality that is the penal colony; whereas Mirbeau's scientist-explorer, by succumbing to the wiles of his guide, becomes a participant in the tortures of the torture garden, and thus a victim of the very reality he is trying to present.

Nevertheless—qualitative distinctions aside—Kafka's thematic structure clearly parallels Mirbeau's. And the similarities in texture—in everything from setting to matters of circumstantial detail—are even more striking. In *In the Penal Colony* "The glare of the sun in the shadeless valley was altogether too strong, it was difficult to collect one's thoughts . . ." In *The Torture Garden* "That horrible sun blackened the grass and bore down on my skull like a heavy laden helmet . . ." In *In the Penal Colony* the place of execution is "the small sandy

valley, a deep hollow surrounded on all sides by naked crags . . ." In *The Torture Garden* it is "an immense quadrilateral space, enclosed by walls . . .," and the torture of the bell, which most closely anticipates Kafka's torture of the "machine," takes place on the "plateau of a broad low hillock . . . covered with a layer of sand."

At this point, however, the similarities in setting and atmosphere end: Mirbeau cancels out or at least mutes the effect of the barren sterility which characterizes the tortures by surrounding them with the grotesque lushness of the garden, in which "tufts of iris lift their tender stalks . . . and plumed rushes, galingales like hair, and giant luzulae mingle their incongruous leafage with the phalliform and vulvoid of the most stupefying arum-lilies . . . bell shaped trumpets, the deep violet of putrefaction on the inside, and the greenish yellow of decomposition on the outer." Disdaining this sort of conventionalized imagery and contrast, which is meant to be symbolic but is at best merely illustrative, Kafka maintains the same setting and atmosphere throughout, using the sun, sand, and barrenness to depict the reality of the execution in all its starkness. In the unshaded valley, against the unrelieved background of the sand and crags, every move of the officer, the condemned man, and the soldier, every cog in the machine, stands out in isolated clarity, thus enabling Kafka to give his naturalistic details a surrealistic, symbolic range and intensity.

This is one reason why the world of Kafka's penal colony seems—and finally *is*—so far removed from Mirbeau's. But the fact remains that Kafka derived key elements of rhetoric, character, and imagery directly from Mirbeau. At the foot of one of the gibbets in the torture garden "an executioner was seated, his instrument case between his feet, cleaning his fine steel implements with silk cloths . . . His face, in repose, expressed kindliness and even joviality, the joviality of a surgeon who has just brought a difficult operation to a successful finish . . ." Yet he too, like the officer in *In the Penal Colony,* labors under difficulties. "Today," he explains to Clara and the narrator, "we no longer know what torture really is . . . although I try to carry on its real tradition . . . I can't stay its decadence all by myself . . . In the olden days they only entrusted these important functions to actual scientists . . . Today the merest shoemaker can presume to fill these honorable and difficult positions . . . However, I do the best I can . . . to resurrect our abolished prestige. For I'm an old conservative myself, an uncompromising nationalist, and I despise . . . all these new methods which the Europeans . . . are bringing us under pretext

of civilization . . . All the filth of your progress . . . is destroying little by little our beautiful traditions of the past. It is only here, in this garden, that they are conserved as well as can be . . . But what difficulties! what obstacles! . . . Without counting all sorts of moral obstacles, painful to relate . . . intrigue, extortion, underhand rivalry, scorn of equity, horror of the beautiful . . . The return to the classic tradition terrifies them . . . I'm not understood. Let us say the word: they despise me . . . Today talent counts for nothing, it isn't given the slightest recognition. . . ."

Thus the old executioner defends what he calls the classic tradition, and his own place in it, with arguments—and in many instances words—that directly anticipate those of the officer in *In the Penal Colony,* who is also the last defender of the old tradition. And Mirbeau's narrator, who has "stupid scruples, like in Europe," reacts to the old executioner's arguments in much the same way Kafka's explorer, also "conditioned by European ways of thought," reacts to the officer's arguments. Most horrifying to Mirbeau's narrator is the fact that the executioner is not concerned with guilt or innocence: "You take a condemned man . . . a condemned man, or anybody else—for it isn't necessary for the success of my torture that the victim be condemned to anything at all . . ."—an attitude similar to that of the officer in *In the Penal Colony,* who likewise explains, to the horror of the explorer, that "the condemned man" does not "know his sentence" or even "that he has been sentenced," and of course "has had no chance of putting up a defense."

To the executioner guilt or innocence is irrelevant—just as, in the ultimate sense, it is also irrelevant to the officer, for his guiding principle, in his own words, is that "Guilt is never to be doubted." The important thing, for both the executioner and the officer, is the execution itself, which in the torture garden is carried out "according to the rites of beauty," in the penal colony according to the rites of the former Commandant, who had invented the machine, and was responsible for the "entire organization of the penal colony."

While the rites differ in many respects—the one stressing beauty, the other justice—there are still a number of significant likenesses. In fact Kafka's "machine," that "REMARKABLE piece of apparatus," is clearly a variation on Mirbeau's "apparatus of crucifixion," the similarities extending to minute but significant details, such as the creaking of the defective wheel in Kafka's machine, which certainly derives from a line in *The Torture Garden:* "a strident noise like the creak-

ing of a pulley filled the air." The difference is that in *In the Penal Colony* the creaking of the wheel is an expressively symbolic detail, not just another item in a long list of Grand Guignol horrors.

And so it is with all of Kafka's borrowings. Close and numerous as they are, they do not in any sense lessen his artistic achievement, which stands out all the more clearly against Mirbeau's sadistic banalities. Like his nineteenth-century predecessors and twentieth-century successors Mirbeau was at once so fascinated and so repulsed by violence (particularly the more overt forms of sexual violence) that he simply could not present the tortures of the torture garden artistically; he could only condemn them, and revel in them—as in the scenes on the flower-boat: "Naked women . . . mouth to mouth and body to body . . . Clasping each other . . ." danced "sacred dances while musicians, crouched behind a screen, blew into short flutes" and an "octopus, embracing the body of a virgin with its tentacles, was amorously crushing her to death. . . ." And this is but a prelude to the climactic scene in which the narrator sees "the women—a tangle of furious flesh and living scarves— . . . abandoning themselves to . . . demoniac passion, around a sort of idol whose massive bronze, of a very ancient patina, rose in the center of the room and towered to the ceiling." From the base of this idol "seven bronze verges thrust forth, to which the dancing women offered flowers and furious caresses . . ." until "shouting, and howling, seven women suddenly hurled themselves upon the seven bronzes. The Idol, embraced by all this raving flesh, vibrated under the multiple shocks of this possession, and the kisses which rang out like the blows of a battering ram on the iron gates of a besieged city. . . ." As for Clara (whom the narrator loves and follows), she remained limp, like "a dead woman . . . there amidst the orgiastic writhing of the bodies," waiting for "all these hands, mouths, breasts, and all this living flesh . . . to possess her dead flesh."

While these scenes are intended to express the connection between love and torture and death, it is hardly necessary to point out that they express little more than Mirbeau's journalistic conception of female lust. The contrast between such scenes and those in which Kafka's officer makes love to the "machine" (with "two fine ladies' handkerchiefs under the collar of his uniform") provides a fair measure of Kafka's powers of transmutation. He found in Mirbeau's sadistic treatment of the garden touches of the imaginative power that he found in Dickens's great but flawed novels, and he used what he found creatively. If, as Kafka himself said, *Amerika* is *David*

Copperfield without Dickens's sentimentality, *In the Penal Colony* is a much closer rendering of *The Torture Garden*—without Mirbeau's sentimentality, and with his jejune despair raised to the highest level of tragic awareness. Kafka's explorer never says "Yes" to the inhumanity of the penal colony; he says "No" to it in both its new and old formulations—and then departs.

Kafka's treatment of his source thus clarifies both the quality and meaning of *In the Penal Colony* and, in doing so, helps to explain its relationship to his other writings. With certain exceptions *(In the Penal Colony* being a partial one) the world Kafka creates in his fiction is a world closer to the dream than to surface actuality: the world we live in when we are "anxious," when we are not, like Joseph K., at work in the bank or doing something equally engrossing and therefore protective, *i.e.,* the sub-real world we live in when our "egos" are trying to come to terms with our "superegos." The conflict is nearly always between some form of "I" and what seems to be actuality, but which is actuality as it has been shaped and patterned by the superego. For this reason, Kafka's heroes move in a world, not of ordinary reality, but of reality submerged in nightmare, a world peopled not with the ordinary characters of any type of fiction, but with human or animal representatives of the forces of the superego. And these forces, dressed up like men or animals, appear and act in his fiction as they appear and act to the beleaguered ego: as having right, and might, and therefore sanity. So that the "I" has no choice but to conform—either that, or be destroyed.

This is the world, considerably modified, that Kafka recreates amidst the naked crags in the shadeless valley " . . . with no one present save the officer, the explorer, the condemned man . . . and the soldier . . . and the remarkable piece of apparatus . . . It was a huge affair. The Bed and the Designer were of the same size and looked like two dark wooden chests . . . each of them was bound at the corners with four rods of brass that almost flashed out rays in the sunlight. Between the chests shuttled the Harrow on a ribbon of steel." No one could mistake these lines as coming from any of Kafka's other stories or novels, not even *The Trial.* Yet the variations —deriving in part from Kafka's dependence on Mirbeau—are not intended to present a different world; they are intended to present a more direct, limited view of the same world—the view dictated by his thematic intention and structure.

The Trial (like all the novels and most of the short stories) is a dramatization of the sub-real; *In the Penal Colony* is the pictorial account of a visit to the sub-real, designed to present the sub-real from an ideally humanistic point of view. Unlike Joseph K., for instance, the explorer is not the "ego," the "I," struggling with the forces that surround him. The explorer is, and remains, a humane scientific observer who cannot understand, much less accept, the ways of the penal colony—save when he is dizzy from the heat and sun, overwrought by the execution. Hence the Mirbeau-inspired modifications in setting, atmosphere, tone, imagery which validate the explorer and his perspective, and thereby enable Kafka to present his picture of the sub-real in circumstantial detail. Important as these modifications are, however, they but serve to bring Kafka's world into pictorial focus. It is the intensity of the picture, deriving from Kafka's vision of the sub-real, and therefore the symbolic, that expresses the ultimate intention of the story, and gives it a depth of symbolic reference that illuminates the barbarism of our own machine civilization. The explorer's dilemma is now the dilemma of every man who shares the explorer's values. For our everyday world has taken on all the characteristics of the penal colony, and if we accept its values, we are the executioners and the executed.

SHEILA PRITCHARD:

Letter to a Boy

When you are done
  with Lancelot
    and jesters
and all such certain fools,
  blue ribbon ravelled,
  the road run dazzled
    to a quagmire bogged
    with sapphire iris,
your horse tired,
  unshod, unfed,
will you be done, I wonder?

This is not a letter of
  I-told-you-so,
but a letter of wonder.

A terribly delicate balance
  between the iris
    and bread
troubles us all. To buy
and how dearly:
    the great quest:
its hints and humors,
  how much instinct, valor,
tradition of the rose,
    or merely
transition. It's dull to plod,
and seed corn ripens with no
blaze.

Boy, who knows? You ask unasking
  receive no answer
only advice (thus did I
  and so, did I).

Look: and so your father
and before, before.
And now you, tiring, still not beating
your beaten horse,
turn sunset toward the choked flowers,
dust spent,
ready for remorse, regret.

This is not a letter of
I-told-you-so,
but to say I don't forget,
I know,
I, too, know.

At the Salt Lick

The simple doe and yearling
almost stranger,
still visit the salt lick, stealing
across the liquid brook
in cold cut-back dawn of sinking moontime,
that frost-encrusted grassblade time
when green is green at noon, and tender,
but sharp as tongue thistle early and late,
and bedding down is a solitary business:

Oak? Trussed about with scrub, and dry
sweet grassed beneath,
to take in the lean sun, before
the sly crisp rattle of twill
and red silk nylon padded in breeches
crackles along the friendly leaves
to first alarum the brazened jays
in a bright blue scold, as they fly
in a flurry of white and safety
hardly away?

There's a den for the new fox—double again—
  over the swamp on the rise.
Beaver slap often in the gray ice creek, a rabbit
  scours the brush, and the scant
white sleet eddies down
  over the nice untrammeled wood patch
  fresh with summer's tender thatch
    of succulent needle green.

This is the watchful time. Nobody quite
  wants us. But the fine white
  hairs along our spines quiver
a wakeful tale of masculine needs.

Breed breeds alike, and like breeds like,
and seven smoking guns at porcupines
    or paper bulls
send sharp speechless ultimatums into every
  safety swamp, and luck
piles salt and sustenance at balance
  in the which of us, by chance?

What has a horn, or what's a horn
  but puberty's excellence,
spring's whim, some dance
nobody knows, directs, or calls
  in step, which we will prance
and thump again, past this one breath's
crisis, birth, and flowering, and maybe death?

JEROME L. MAZZARO:

A Single Base

Inside the yard the child sees the dawn
between the wires of a cyclone fence
and thinks the fiery sun is framed in wire
as are the paths and roses on the lawn.

A different concept is beyond his sense;
so used to roses he cannot conceive
of one whole fiery mass, and sees the fire
as empty spaces latticed in the weave.

But he will learn the sun is not a rose
that rambles in the wire its fleeting leaf.
The larger years will teach him of the world
outside the fence and pocket this belief
as he now pockets rose leaves darkly curled
and slips them in deep corners of his clothes.

For Harold

You were the king (at least you claimed to be)
of shoving landslides and a fractured knee,
and we all bowed to you, taking your side
in this and that. We even helped you hide

when William came, and told him you were dead
or gone. I don't remember which we said,
but he believed our tale, and claimed your crown
and golden birds for having knocked you down.

You went away one winter. Exile I think.
It's so confusing now. It was the brink
of Christmas and the snow (The telegram
came later. That I'm sure.) had covered tram

and trolley tracks. It was in all the books:
killed by a sniper near the river Luxe.
And all of Hastings Street sent masses out,
even gulled William, who began the rout.

Always the Threshold of a Horse

Always the threshold of a horse he stood,
his muzzle high, his stripes, his painted hoofs,
his manner, even the way he shied his food;
and yet they knew that he could never be.

Even his closest grooves were only wood,
but children, breathing love, avoided proofs
and made him warm, though they could never free
his spirit . . . Always the threshold of a horse.

And women riding took his reins in hand,
holding against the outbreak of his force,
and yet they knew that he could never be.

The old men, too, spurring the creature on,
could find no praises that might charm his wood:
always the threshold of a horse he stood.

ULRICH WEISSTEIN:

The Last Days of Thomas Mann

ERIKA MANN: *Das Letzte Jahr: Bericht über meinen Vater.* L. Fischer (Frankfurt), 1956.

Like an evil omen, Thomas Mann's death in the fall of 1955 seems to have presaged the end, not of an epoch in German literary history (for that had already occurred in the early thirties of this century), but of the Indian summer of Germany's literary reputation in the world. For within the space of little more than one year, the other remaining representatives of the glorious age were to join ranks with the shade of their illustrious fellow-writer, among them Gottfried Benn the poet, Bertolt Brecht the dramatist, and Ernst Robert Curtius, the critic and friend of André Gide. Left all by himself was the aging Hermann Hesse, author of *Steppenwolf* and *Magister Ludi,* whose international reputation has always been inferior to that of his universally read colleagues Brecht and Mann. The ablest German authors of the succeeding generation—with the sole exception, perhaps, of Ernst Jünger—are just beginning to come into their own even in their native country and, at present, are virtually unknown to the English-speaking public. It remains to be seen whether, ten or fifteen years from now, the names of Gertrud von Le Fort, Elisabeth Langgässer, Carl Zuckmayer, Friedrich Georg Jünger, and Stefan Andres will sound as familiar to our ears as those of their literary forbears do now.

Thomas Mann has found an early apologist in the person of his daughter Erika, who, having been her father's trusted secretary and collaborator, may also be presumed to be his literary executor. In *Das Letzte Jahr: Bericht über meinen Vater* she has undertaken to describe the final year of grace which was granted to the distinguished novelist. One is hard put to find a common denominator for this loving account of Mann's last artistic and critical achievements and of the ensuing sickness to death. For here we have, all rolled into one, a diary couched in the language of a journalistic eye-witness report, a character sketch in the form of a moral treatise, and a collection of *trivia* hardly conducive to enhance the moral stature of

the writer. As Erika Mann herself puts it in her somewhat labored German, her booklet "claims to be merely a faithful report, in which important and negligible, remarkable and common, memorable and passing events are mixed much in the same fashion in which they appear in real life."

One feels tempted to speak of this report as the apotheosis of a bourgeois who also happened to be a great artist. Imagine Christiane Vulpius to have written a *Life of Goethe* or Constanze Mozart a *Life with Wolfgang* (provided that these ladies had possessed the literary talent required for such undertakings), and you will know why it is that great men should never be judged by their men-servants or their next-of-kin, the former tending to underrate, the latter to overestimate the personal, civic and artistic virtues of their models. What is more: an apology of the sort here under consideration, with its inherent tendency to sound authoritative or to fix certain details of character firmly in the mind of the public, is bound to prejudice the future biographers of the individual so treated. Lacking the objectivity and the historical distance needed to see such details in their proper perspective, *Das Letzte Jahr* should be read with considerably more than the usual grain of salt.

One of the most controversial issues that arise in connection with Erika Mann's account is the manner in which she deals with the moral aspect of the life of the Magician, as her father was called in the intimate family circle. Already in the beginning of her book she makes the following didactic statement: "If I were asked for the three most salient features of my father's character, I would not hesitate to name his modesty, benevolence and sense of humor." To these, she later adds the complementary traits of courage and naiveté. Reserving Thomas Mann's naiveté and his sense of humor for a somewhat more detailed analysis, I should like to make it clear that, since it is manifestly impossible to judge a man's courage, benevolence or modesty by his literary output, the reader is forced to rely on the facts adduced by Erika Mann in support of her thesis, his sole criteria of judgment being the quality of the material so presented and the few facts known about Thomas Mann's private existence.

Thomas Mann's courage, for instance, is demonstrated by means of a sketchy account of the circumstances presumed to have arisen in connection with an attempt, by the German Air Force, to murder the writer during a flight from Stockholm to London in the early

days of World War II. But courage here is negatively defined as the ability to keep face in a precarious situation, and not positively as the heroic principle of action in times of crisis. Mann's benevolence, on the other hand, is shown to be an outgrowth of his humanitarianism, an attitude which was common enough among the artists of his generation. His modesty, finally, is made ambiguous by his willingness to let himself be feted and by the pride he took in the medals and ribbons showered upon him on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

A more clearcut picture emerges in connection with Mann's peculiar brand of childlike naiveté, the more luckily so since this facet of his character was a legacy which he duly bequeathed to several of his children. Erika Mann, for one, rather naively describes the attitudes and events which are essential to an understanding of her father's mental disposition. One could only wish that she had also inherited some of Thomas Mann's humor, with which to offset the credulity she so frankly displays on every page of her book. For it is through the medium of irony that Mann succeeded in neutralizing the effects of his inborn naiveté. As a literary device, irony provided him with that mask of humorous sophistication for which he is justly known and which he managed to wear with inimitable grace and distinction.

Thomas Mann's naiveté in matters political is so familiar that it requires no reconsideration. Painful indeed is it to see how completely both father and daughter were taken in by the "spontaneous" reception they received in the Eastern zone of Germany on the occasion of the Schiller sesquicentennial in Weimar. The whole impression is summed up by Erika Mann in the classic statement: *Derlei nicht inszenierbar* (such things simply cannot be staged). On the same level of political astuteness lie her father's repeated attempts to win support for his peace proclamations among the artistic and scientific notables of our time. When thwarted—as in the case of Arnold Toynbee's refusal to dabble in affairs so distinctly outside his intellectual ken—the pacifistic desire promptly rebounds and allows itself to be transformed into a blunt invective against the "Professor Know-All," as Erika Mann calls the reluctant historian.

This all-pervasive naiveté of the Mann family also takes the form of a superstitious belief in the fatal power of numbers mysticism. So it comes that daughter Erika willingly subscribes to the fearful symmetry (to use a term invented by William Blake) which her

father believed to have underlain his earthly existence. Born in 1875, he published his *Buddenbrooks* at the age of twenty-five, his *Magic Mountain* at fifty, received the Nobel Prize at fifty-five and conceived his *Doctor Faustus* at seventy. By an ultimate irony of fate, he died at the age of eighty in room 111 of a hospital in Zurich, Switzerland. Strange that, laboring under this apprehension, Erika Mann should not have further extended this "ultimate" symmetry of numbers to include the important chapter of *Doctor Faustus,* in which we are told about Wendell Kretzschmer's memorable analysis of Beethoven's piano sonata op. 111.

As for the humor, it is so essential an ingredient of Thomas Mann's literary style that no doubt can remain as to its impact also on the writer's extra-artistic mode of existence. In *The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man,* an enterprise that spans a large part of Mann's novelistic career (a fragment of this novel was published in 1911; the first volume of the uncompleted sequence appeared roughly forty years later), the full flowering of that humor and its slow deterioration into a lascivious mannerism can easily be traced by the observant reader. Much of the humor in Thomas Mann's life, on the other hand, was of an altogether involuntary nature, in that it is not so much the author's sense of humor itself as the humorous nature of the situations in which we find him involved which most delights us.

Many of the episodes which Erika Mann retraces in her biographical study appear to have been lifted bodily out of the above-mentioned *Confessions,* so quaintly familiar do they sound to the reader of that charming satire on middle-class life and manners. A trip from Switzerland to Stuttgart, for instance, gives rise to the following idyllic occurrence:

> In Rottweil we interrupted our journey in order to take our lunch. A little while ago already, we had stopped on the open road on account of the *Apéritif* which we were wont to carry along on our trips, since T. M. had the habit of taking a glass of *Vermouth* before each meal; and of the flat twin-flasks in a dainty leather case which accompanied us everywhere, one was always filled with *Cinzano.*

Equally hilarious are the description of Mann's departure from Göttingen station and the account of an audience he and his wife had with Queen Juliana of the Netherlands ("When, after approxi-

mately fifty minutes, the guests rose to leave, the Queen made it understood that, as far as she was concerned, there was no need to hurry. . . . Her Majesty talked about her daughters, T. M. about his grandchildren, and together they reminisced about the long years they had spent in exile. Unfortunately, Prince Bernhard could not be present.") Other episodes seem to belong more properly among Karl Sternheim's boldly executed scenes *From the Heroic Life of the Bourgeoisie,* where consumptive barbers are shown to hum Wagnerian love-tunes while brushing their teeth.

On the more serious side, Erika Mann's report is certainly not without merits, if only for the reason that she acquaints us with the thoughts and plans which occupied her father in the terminal phase of his career. Thus we learn that an essay on Chekhov and an introduction to the first English edition of Heinrich von Kleist's short novels (both completed) were to be followed by a comedy tentatively entitled *The Marriage of Luther,* growing out of Mann's intensive study of certain Renaissance characters. (The essays have just been published in book form under the title of *Nachlese,* Frankfurt, 1956). In view of the evidence now available to us it seems safe to assume, however, that unlike Goethe, Titian or Yeats, Thomas Mann did not die at the height of his artistic power and that, had he lived to be ninety, he would have presented the world with a companion-piece to his *Felix Krull* at best.

I may be forgiven for adding a few words regarding that part of Erika Mann's narration which is concerned with the terror and mystery of death. Thomas Mann's death, it now appears, was in no way comparable to that of Andreas Aschenbach in the unforgettable *Death in Venice,* coming, as it did, anti-climactically and after a year amply filled with celebrations and homages. The perusal of this account of the author's fading away under the soothing influence of anesthetics causes one to reflect on the difference prevailing between the ancient and the modern modes of dying. In depriving the dying man of his consciousness, modern science prevents him from achieving that grandeur or tragic sublimity which so often transfigured the death-struggle of genius in the past. In our prosaic age there is no room for the summing up which authenticates a man's claim to immortality.

Thomas Mann, one gathers from this account, did not feel the cold hand of death as Mozart and Michelangelo felt it. Mozart intended the *Requiem* for himself, and Beethoven wrote his *Heili-*

genstädter Testament more than twenty years prior to his death, but Thomas Mann was working on a comedy when the fatal blow struck him. He has left behind no word as memorable as Beethoven's "Plaudite, Amici! Comoedia Finita Est" or Goethe's and Schiller's plea for light. For us moderns, indeed, it is always the quiet passing away and the somber reflections occasioned by the "rigid, bold, pallid and strange face in the mortuary room of the clinic." Who would still venture to look at a corpse as Eckermann looked at that of his venerated master, exulting in its divinely fashioned form and in the sculptural beauty which nearly caused him to forget that the immortal spirit had already left the lifeless body?

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